

Two Palestinian Documentaries

By Fedwa Lababidi

The Palestinian-Israeli peace negotiations that started off in 1992 brought about a new vision of the Palestinian women's movement. Once the new phase in national strife surfaced there was a need for re-evaluating previous work undertaken by the Palestinian women's movement, in order to generate plans that would fit the requirements of the new stage.

Accordingly the idea of producing local documentary films that tackle Palestinian women's experiences arose. Those films are often used in the educational campaign along with films imported from Arab and Third World countries. Thanks to the Center for Women's Studies in Jerusalem, the first feminist documentary film entitled "History is Noble through Men" was produced in 1993. Several feminist documentary films followed. They were produced either by the center in question or by other feminist centers or by independent male/female filmmakers. I will attempt to discuss and analyze the image of women and their role in society as presented in two documentaries produced by women directors.

Al Del' Al Qaseer (45 minutes): This documentary, directed by Hanna Maslah and produced by the Center for Women's Studies in Jerusalem, was shot in the West Bank in 1995. The film presents several prototypes of women in Palestinian Society namely rural women who work in agriculture, modern educated women, refugee women living in camps and members of Parliament. The documentary presents images of women in four basic scenes that I will examine below.

The first scene introduces us to rural women and projects them in contradictory settings. For instance we find the strong, forceful and productive woman, the decision maker, the breadwinner who is exploited and works without pay, and finally the submissive, obedient and dutiful woman who accepts the subservient discriminatory situation that is imposed on her.

In the first scene female agricultural workers are portrayed as productive participants that play an active role assisting men in most of the farming tasks. Many times these women engage in varied agricultural chores that involve intensive

work requiring painstaking physical effort and perseverance that often exceeds that of men, such as land cultivation, weeding, hand sowing, harvesting, and marketing crop. Women are also in charge of the livestock owned by the family where they are responsible for poultry, animal husbandry and herding.

Through the stories of three women farmers, the film depicts the injustices prevalent in their lives. All three women though involved in intensive agricultural work are exploited economically for their work goes unremunerated. One of the three is a widow whereas the other two are co-wives stuck with a sterile husband who exploits them. The former, being the head of household and its only breadwinner, utilizes all the money she earns to cater for her family's needs including education. The destitute life that she led urged her to challenge the prevailing discriminatory social norms by proving that women are capable of partaking in all social roles.

The situation of the two other women is no different. Even though both women work all day carrying out agricultural activities, raising animals, cleaning, cooking, etc. their work goes unaccounted for by their husband who is the administrator, financial planner, and decision maker responsible for all market-oriented activities. At a certain point in the film the husband is asked why he has taken two wives. He explains that he wants a male heir (a woman is viewed as a reproductive tool, and if she fails to procure a male son, her husband can take up another wife or a third or a fourth). The husband also explained that in taking two wives he can have more children who are additional sources of labor.

The film reveals that the two co-wives are victims. Their marriages were arranged without their consent and owing to their subordinate position have to put up with a husband who exploits them materially and sexually. Given that their husband is sterile they are robbed of the joys of motherhood. At the same time, they are deprived of the right

to an education and thus lack the credentials that enable them to be financially independent.

The second scene introduces us to a different exemplar of women, Malak is a modern educated working woman, a professional working in the field of social guidance. She is married and the mother of two children. Through Malak's story we learn how she tries to strike a balance between her three roles, wife/mother/worker outside the house, by sharing her domestic responsibilities with her husband who is reluctant to partake in some traditional female tasks. This scene projects a different picture where women are granted more rights and privileges. They are freer in the sense that they are allowed to obtain an education, are permitted to work, and are economically independent, and politically active.

The third scene portrays women as active in politics, national resistance and women's affairs. We are introduced to Dalal who comes from a poor family and lives in a refugee camp. She defies patriarchal authority and succeeds in challenging prevalent traditional stereotypes that discriminate between men and women by relegating the latter to the private domain of the household. At the university in 1986, Dalal succeeds in landing a seat in the university student's council. After that she becomes politically active and starts her climb up the ladder. She achieves a high level position despite the enormous pressure and coercion put on her to withdraw her nomination. Unlike prevalent stereotypical images of women as deferential and domesticated, Dalal is bold, defiant and forceful.

Stories of Honor and Shame (*Qisas mina Al-Aar wa Al-Sharaf*): The documentary was filmed in the Gaza strip in 1996 and is produced by the Center for Women's Issues in

Gaza. Antonia Caccia, the director, sheds light on the situation of Palestinian women in the Gaza strip by documenting the life stories of several Palestinian women. The film highlights two conflicting types of women namely those who accepted their fate and succumbed to their inferior disposition and others who revolted, and defied the prevailing patriarchal society thus securing some of their rights.

Cassia attempts to portray several prototypes of women:

- The ignorant/passive wife who encourages her husband to take another wife since she is unable to produce a male heir.
- The one who takes matters into her own hands and divorces her husband. Her predicament puts her under constant scrutiny, yet she finally gives in to social pressure and remarries.
- Female university students currently pursuing their education and actively participating in national resistance.
- Women who deviate from the norm and choose unconventional professions.

The film clearly portrays women's subordinate and inferior position. It focuses on various themes such as women's bodies, their reproductive and nurturing role, honor and shame, etc. Cassia depicts how men in Palestinian society manipulate and control women's bodies under the pretext of protecting their honor. Due to the threat of losing one's virginity, girls are wed at an early age. Their marriages are arranged; they are forced to leave school, and to wear the veil. This all encompassing fear of endangering one's family honor and of promiscuity also applies to divorcees whose every move is monitored and who remain confined to the realm of the household.

Translated by Myriam Sfeir

Upcoming in Al-Raida

*Arab Women and Communication
Women Centers in the Arab World*
